

# Best Friends®

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To the  
*good*  
*life*

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## 100 ways to Save Them All

Lifesaving  
breakthroughs  
in no-kill

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## Mutual Admiration Society

Kittens and the  
elderly, cats and kids  
help one another



\$4.95 US

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THE  
**mutual admiration**  
SOCIETY



PHOTO BY KAREN HOLLISH / PIMA ANIMAL CARE CENTER









Marion Jane and Thelma Bradfield play with Peaches and Turtle.

needed and valuable again, Rebecca observes. She goes on to say that those involved know they're performing an important service, that they're giving back to the community. "All of them understand that without them, these kittens would have died," Rebecca says. And, really, what could be a bigger accomplishment than saving a life?

Geriatric studies have shown that a person's sense of purpose is a huge factor in emotional health and longevity. Those without purpose are more likely to suffer from depression and have shorter life spans.

The kittens in the foster program aren't just cute distractions; they engender a renewed sense of purpose in the residents of the memory care center. Even those who are unable to participate in hands-on caregiving benefit from having the kittens around. For example, staff members placed a kitten in the lap of one wheelchair-bound woman who is so compromised she has to be fed and doesn't speak other than to occasionally say yes or no.

While the staff watched her and the baby cat, she began stroking the kitten. When the kitten began purring, this largely non-verbal woman said, "Purring." The power of that connection was so strong and so important to her that she was able to retrieve the word "purring." Rebecca says, "You could see the joy in her face from holding that new little life."

### IT'S ABOUT CONNECTION

While our relationships with animals can offer many health and wellness benefits, one of the strongest is connection, explains Bill Benson, a California-based licensed psychotherapist who uses dogs in his practice, the Mental Gym. Bill is also board chair for the Peacock Foundation, a nonprofit that uses animal-assisted therapy to help at-risk youth in the Los Angeles area, and he has observed the perks of the human-animal bond many times.

He's seen children who are homeless or who have witnessed domestic violence regain hope and become empowered through interactions with animals brought into therapy sessions at the Peacock Foundation. When the children are with an animal and the animal is responding positively to them, Bill says the experience "reboots the basic human hopefulness that



John Claude Collinet feeds Turtle.

PHOTOS THIS PAGE BY KAREN HOLLISH / PIMA ANIMAL CARE CENTER

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everything's OK. Kids will absorb their parents' conflicts and think they're the problem. If a dog wags his tail or a cat purrs, that reinforces that you're not the problem and you're valid."

Animals accept us as we are. They allow us to be in the moment. They give us the chance to connect with another being who is nonjudgmental, one who offers us a measure of emotional safety and purpose. Having that connection, that acceptance from another creature, is invaluable for the well-being of all people, Bill explains.

His observations are especially true for the most vulnerable members of society. "Whether you're in jail and you're training a dog or you're at the end of your life and you're caring for a kitty, that gives you a sense of purpose," he says. "A sense of something outside of yourself. A way to contribute. And that bolsters your self-esteem." Better still? The benefits don't stop with the person who's giving the care. The benefits extend to the animals in need and can be as far reaching as enhancing their chances of finding forever homes. It comes down to saving their lives.

### **BREAKING DOWN BARRIERS**

Instances of mutually-beneficial cat love span the age spectrum, too. For example, it's not uncommon for beginner readers to feel self-conscious about reading aloud. That worry about how you sound when you read, however, is further elevated when you can't hear yourself, which is the reality for the children learning to read at the Northwest School for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children in Shoreline, Washington, just outside of Seattle. "We have kids who are really strong readers," says Danise Ito, a teacher at the school. "But if they don't have perfect speech or perfect language, they can be made fun of out in the world."

Enter the Kitty Literature program. Operated by Seattle Humane, the program offers children ages 5 to 10 the opportunity to help shelter staff socialize cats by reading aloud to them. The kids sit and read and interact with the cats in 20-minute sessions. "The purpose of the program is for the kids to build their confidence and not be embarrassed if they're stumbling across words and trying to figure things out, because the cats aren't judging them," says Jenna Pringle, Seattle Humane's marketing communications manager. "The

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Young readers from the Northwest School for Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Children have an attentive listener in Brisa.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SEATTLE HUMANE





cats are getting attention and they're also being exposed to children of different ages, different mannerisms."

When Danise at the Northwest School learned about the Kitty Literature program, she thought it would be a terrific way for her second and third graders to gain confidence in their reading skills and in themselves. The kids were excited — even the ones who were a little nervous because they hadn't interacted with cats before.

In their classrooms, the students learned about cats to prepare themselves for their sessions at the animal shelter. They also selected the books they would read to the cats and practiced reading those books at school. The knowledge that they would be reading to the cats was a great motivator, says Danise. "They really wanted to be fluent readers when they got there. They had to impress those cats."

When the students finally got their chance to read aloud to the cats, it was a positive experience. Danise says, "They had fun reading. It wasn't like someone was correcting them. It was just cats. They weren't there to judge how they were reading. No one was correcting their speech or if they misread something. They were really proud of themselves that they had this experience, that they were able to read in this room full of cats."

Interacting with the cats also showed the students that they can make connections with other living beings where language isn't a barrier. For many deaf and hard-of-hearing children, Danise notes, interacting with people who are not hearing-impaired or don't know sign language is a challenge and can leave them feeling lonely and isolated.

Danise says the parents reported that their children badgered them about adopting a cat after their experience with the Kitty Literature program. And even though the kids went on other field trips during the school year, their time with the cats is what they talked about the most.

The children taking part in reading aloud programs or animal-assisted therapy group sessions and the elderly residents at Catalina Springs Memory Care may not be able to scientifically point to the health and wellness benefits they receive from interacting with cats, but they know that the cats have enriched their lives. And while that is certainly good news for the caring people involved in these special relationships, the cherry on top is undeniably sweet. After all, countless lives are being saved in the process. 🐾



Students read to Ollivander at Seattle Humane.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF SEATTLE HUMANE

A photograph of an elderly woman with short white hair, wearing a blue and white patterned shirt, sitting in a chair and holding a small white kitten. The photo is framed in a decorative purple border.

Check out this heartwarming video about the kitten foster program at Catalina Springs Memory Care. Warning: Viewers may want to have Kleenex nearby.

[tinyurl.com/csmc-cats](http://tinyurl.com/csmc-cats)

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